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26 November 1964

DRAFT MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Feasibility and Possible Advantages of a Continued Concentration on Counterinsurgency (Option A)

DISCUSSION

I. ANALYSIS OF THE PROBLEM

1. Current considerations of US policy courses for South Vietnam are tending to concentrate on three not necessarily exclusive Options: (A) continued emphasis on counterinsurgency, (B) escalation, or at least some overt military action against North Vietnam, and (C) negotiation. Option A is often categorized as "more of the same"; but this label is inaccurate and misleading. It blurs the distinction between palliatives undertaken within the present parameters of our current counterinsurgency program and actions of a fairly radical nature (though no more radical than negotiation or escalation) which might be undertaken within South Vietnam to improve our position there. The situation in South Vietnam has deteriorated far past the point where palliatives hold out any rational hope. (We would put the short-term objectives enumerated in Annex I of Saigon's 1440, dated 9 November 1964, in

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this category.) The fact that this is so, however, does not mean that concentration on counterinsurgency within South Vietnam is no longer a feasible US policy option. This memorandum will outline some of the steps which we believe merit serious consideration under the broader definition of Option A.

II. POSSIBILITIES OF COUNTERINSURGENCY

2. To improve the US-backed anti-Communist position in South Vietnam and to reduce the politico-military menace of Communist-directed insurgency, five central problems must be addressed and, in some measure, resolved:

- (1) Rural insecurity
- (2) Intelligence on the enemy
- (3) South Vietnamese governmental effectiveness at the provincial level
- (4) The effectiveness and image of the Central government in Saigon (this is not the same thing as (3) above)
- (5) The problem of inducements
- (6) The problem of confidence

We believe there are things which can be done by the US and the GVN, working in concert, in every one of these critical problem areas.

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A. RURAL INSECURITY

3. This is essentially a military and police problem. Not the least of the reasons why the GVN has so far failed to solve it is the fact that the GVN's military and police establishment is not structured to cope efficiently with the problem it actually faces. Whatever and no matter how valid be the historical reasons, the fact remains that the South Vietnamese Army's present organization was devised to cope with the threat of a conventional invasion across the 17th parallel, not an internal insurrection. Furthermore, the South Vietnamese military establishment (ARVN) is still charged with the dual responsibility of protecting the country from external invasion and coping with an internal insurrection. We do not believe it can discharge the latter responsibility without being largely absolved of the former. (The implications of this belief in terms of US involvement are discussed below.)

4. The present corps-division military organizational pattern actually hampers the conduct of counterinsurgency for two reasons: (a) it creates more headquarters echelons than the South Vietnamese have the administrative capability to staff and, (b) it makes it virtually impossible for a province chief

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to do his job. The war against the Viet Cong will be won -- or lost -- at the provincial level, ~~basics~~ Under the present structure, the province chief, in his military capacity, is subordinate to a division commander who has final say on the tactical disposition of the divisional forces, including the forces of the province chief. As has been repeatedly demonstrated in practice, this means that no province chief can be sure of what forces will be available to him. Indeed, he can never be certain that forces under his jurisdiction and in his province today will not be pulled out tomorrow for a divisional sweep or exercise in some other area. This makes realistic military and security planning at the provincial level virtually impossible.

5. Military progress against the Viet Cong cannot reasonably be expected unless or until the South Vietnamese Army is structured to cope with the foe it is actually fighting. We would recommend that the notion of a regional command -- which, to minimize disruption, could still be called a corps -- be retained for logistical and other reasons. The division as a headquarters entity, however, should be abolished. We

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would further recommend that the GVN's military establishment be restructured along the following lines:*

(a) There are now about 164 battalions in the South Vietnamese order of battle. Twelve of these (the equivalent of the Marines and the Airborne Brigade) should be assigned as a general strategic reserve. Ninety battalions should be more or less permanently assigned to provincial pacification duties.**

(b) The remaining 62 battalions should be organized into approximately 10 more or less self-contained "mobile groups." These could conduct the sweeps and be devoted to attacking identified concentrations of VC regular units or coming to the assistance of beleaguered province chiefs.

* This is an illustrative sketch and does not pretend to be a detailed military plan.

** This would "average" two battalions in each of South Vietnam's 45 provinces. Such an "average," however, is arbitrary and unrealistic. Some provinces would need more regular forces permanently stationed therein, some less, and the actual disposition would be further influenced by decisions to concentrate GVN efforts on certain provinces while virtually writing off others for the time being.

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6. Under this concept each province chief would have a known force level on which to plan and with which to work. His regular battalions or companies, however, would be but a part of his military arsenal. To curtail the Viet Cong, we must learn to fight like the Viet Cong, which means starting at the lowest echelon and working upwards. To do this, full and proper use must be made of provincial forces (formerly called the Civil Guard) and popular forces (formerly SDC), who should be allowed to devote their entire efforts to duties which they are trained and equipped to perform, and not used improperly as supplementary regular troops.

a. As with the Viet Cong, the GVN's military effort should commence at the lowest level of population concentration -- the hamlet and village. Responsibility for local defense at this level should be vested in SDC-type forces native to the area who would be responsible for conducting security patrols in the vicinity of their own homes and rice fields and, if attacked, for attempting to hold out until help could arrive from the next higher echelon.

b. The next echelon would be the district, to which some civil guard forces would be more or less permanently assigned.

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These forces would serve as a "fire brigade" to bail out hamlet and village forces under VC attack with which the latter could not cope and, simultaneously, would be responsible for conducting patrols and sweeping operations within their district -- and only within their district. Forces assigned at this level should, in large measure, themselves be native to the district in question.

c. At the province level, the province chief would have additional civil guard-type units plus his stiffening of permanently assigned regulars. Provincial forces would perform fire brigade functions for district chiefs and would conduct more elaborate sweeps and patrols throughout the whole province. If faced with an immediate attack or military threat with which his own forces could not cope, the province chief would appeal to his regional (i.e., corps) commander.

7. The concept of a self-contained mobile group is one that the French employed successfully and effectively not only during their campaign against the Viet Minh after World War II, but also during the initial period in which they acquired control of their Indochinese domains. It also has been effectively used in Laos, and could be effectively used in South Vietnam.

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The creation of such mobile groups would provide prestige and employment for Vietnamese general officers, enable a flexible disposition of forces to cope with VC regular concentrations, and permit the conduct of useful security operations on a regional or inter-provincial basis without disturbing provincial force levels.

8. Supplementing the above elements would be various irregular components heretofore known as the CIDG. These, including Montagnard elements, can be effective if used in their native areas with an appreciation of their limitations -- considerations which preclude their employment as quasi-regular forces. In certain areas of South Vietnam, regional peculiarities could and should be harnessed to support the government's military effort. For example, in regions where the Hoa Hao are strong, Hoa Hao forces should be used as SDC and Civil Guard troops; in Cao Dai areas, similar considerations should apply. Such reliance on regional forces might create long-term problems for a future central government. At the moment, however, survival is the paramount concern of any non-Communist government and future problems will have to be deferred to a future time.

9. The above tactical disposition and suggested use of ground forces should be supplemented by air and naval units in

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appropriate fashion. As discussed below, this form of supplementary support is an area in which the US might well play a greater role.

10. The military structuring outlined above may seem radical. If seriously essayed, however, it could be implemented without undue disruption of the GVN's military effort, would hold out much more promise of success than present arrangements; and is certainly no more radical than currently discussed plans of escalation or negotiation.

B. INTELLIGENCE ON THE ENEMY

11. The type of military reorganization outlined above would greatly facilitate and improve the acquisition of intelligence on the Viet Cong. An essential element of this military reorganization involves the more-or-less permanent stationing in a given area of forces who, in large measure, are themselves native to that area. Under present arrangements and dispositions, GVN troops operating in rural regions are usually considered alien foreigners by the inhabitants of those regions, whereas Viet Cong forces, particularly VC district and provincial forces, are often considered (literally and metaphorically) as relatives and friends. Furthermore, the

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present practice of shifting regular forces around on divisional exercises and sweeps prevents any effective buildup of personal relationships and rapport with the inhabitants of any given area. Without this degree of personal rapport between citizens and local soldiery, the acquisition of intelligence on the Viet Cong enemy becomes virtually impossible.

12. Much more needs to be done, and can be done, with the police mechanism in Vietnam to handle the predominantly police-type aspects of counterinsurgency, including population and resources control and the building of informer nets to acquire intelligence on the enemy. Recommendations in this sphere may be found in other current documents and do not need to be elaborated here. The same is true of recommendations for administrative restructuring and reorganization in the intelligence and security fields.

C. GOVERNMENT EFFECTIVENESS AT THE PROVINCIAL LEVEL

13. The Vietnamese peasant has but the dimmest conception of a central government. He knows little and cares less about what happens on the streets and in the salons of Saigon. His

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14. Such a concentration on regional or provincial administration -- even at the expense of central government authority -- would produce one other significant political side-effect, which we read as a benefit. It would minimize the importance of political upheaval or turmoil in Saigon itself. Furthermore, should such extremities even become necessary, it would lay the groundwork for anti-Communist redoubts in a situation where central authority had collapsed and Communist forces were able to take over the city of Saigon.

D. CENTRAL GOVERNMENT EFFECTIVENESS AND IMAGE

15. Even if we actually concentrate the bulk of our efforts at the regional level and try to achieve an unadvertized decentralization of power, considerable endeavor should also be devoted to building the image of the central government in Saigon (and, over the longer term, its real competence and authority). In this sphere, the steps to take are obvious and the Embassy has outlined most of them already. Our two principal tasks would be (a) to work effectively with those persons who have been given positions of authority, and (b) by all means possible, including covert contact and association, to dissuade and discourage the kind of carping criticism politically articulate Vietnamese find so congenial.

16. With regard to (a), US objectives would be better served if we could eliminate a certain ambivalence which has colored

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goodly number of our aid efforts (particularly ⁱⁿ the non-military ^e spheres) have been directed to long-term improvement objectives designed to benefit the whole country; they have often not been keyed to immediate political needs or realities. We believe that civil assistance and economic support efforts should be concentrated in those segments of the country where the GVN writ seems to run strongest. The message should be conveyed that those who cooperate with Saigon receive tangible benefits, which are denied to or withheld from those who remain unfully passive or confer their allegiance on the Viet Cong. The essence of the kind of aid resource allocation we have in mind here is well-spelled out in the report of the RAND corporation survey team which recently returned from Vietnam.

F. THE PROBLEM OF CONFIDENCE

18. At the present time, discouragement over counterinsurgency prospects is rife in Saigon, throughout South Vietnam, and in Washington. Little is likely to be achieved in the counterinsurgency field unless some spark of hope can be nurtured -- or kindled. Achieving this may require external action, as discussed below. Internally, however, some tangible local success is essential. As the Embassy has pointed out, achieving such success will require initial concentration of US and GVN effort on certain

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key areas, even if this means virtually writing off other areas to the enemy for the time being. The theory behind the "Hop Tac" program is sound and we endorse it. What is needed, however, is the real beginning of action rather than continued planning exercises on the GVN -- and, indeed, on the US -- side.

III. THE SUPPLEMENT OF EXTERNAL OPERATIONS

19. Whether military strikes or pressures against North Vietnam would impel Hanoi to call off the Viet Cong, and, if such strikes were successful, whether they would seriously impair Viet Cong insurgency capabilities are both legitimately debatable questions. In the context of this paper, however, their answers are, in certain measure, irrelevant. With the Embassy, we believe the psychological climate within South Vietnam has reached the point where some form of overt retaliation against the North is virtually essential for morale reasons. Retaliation undertaken to improve South Vietnamese morale, however, can be carefully tailored to that objective and need not incur the risks of escalation or Free World condemnation that might have to be run in essaying military moves designed to achieve other objectives.

20. For several reasons, military pressures against the North should involve joint US and GVN activity. Strictly US

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actions would incur a real psychological risk of evoking an irrational South Vietnamese sympathy for their Northern brothers under foreign attack -- a psychological predisposition which the Communists would be certain to exploit. Purely GVN action (even if it had covert US support) would convey the impression of US reluctance to become openly involved in an extended struggle and its unwillingness to assume the risk of retaliation it was encouraging the South Vietnamese to incur.

21. In concrete terms, the psychological lift required could, we believe, be provided by the following:

(a) An expanded program of maritime operations against North Vietnam. The US hand in these operations would not have to be shown, but the GVN should be permitted at least implicitly to acknowledge their existence and crow "unofficially" about their real or fancied successes.

(b) Joint US/GVN aerial attacks on infiltration-associated targets in Southern Laos. Success here should be allowed to redound to the credit of the GVN's air force, but it should not be denied that this is an endeavor in which the US is supplementing GVN efforts.

(c) Some form of actual strike against the North, initially confined to targets clearly associated with infiltration activities of North Vietnamese support of the Viet Cong -- or, at least, with targets that could be claimed to be associated with

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such activities. Initially, we could see if the necessary morale boost could be provided by strikes of a nature ambiguous enough to minimize adverse Communist and Free World reactions -- e.g., strikes along the Laos border and around the Mu Gia pass in areas whose territorial status is in some dispute, or strikes in areas where attacks over the North Vietnamese boundary might have been the results of navigational error rather than deliberate intent to violate DRV territory. The message to be conveyed would be that the US and the GVN were unwilling to allow excessive concern for privileged sanctuaries to prejudice their taking steps deemed necessary to protect South Vietnamese integrity.

(d) If such ambiguous strikes did not sufficiently encourage our South Vietnamese allies, consideration would have to be given to strikes clearly aimed at North Vietnamese targets. Here, in the initial phase, the targets should be confined to ones whose association with infiltration activities and Viet Cong support could be plausibly claimed -- i.e., roads and bridges in the Southern part of North Vietnam or, perhaps, training areas and barracks in the Vinh area.

(e) Such actions as outlined above would have to be adjusted in a proper mix and combination, the exact proportions

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of which would more or less have to be played by ear, at least in the initial stages.

IV. THE US ROLE AND INGREDIENT

22. Adoption of the counterinsurgency program outlined above would involve some revision and expansion of US activity and US commitment to the struggle in South Vietnam.

(a) If the ARVN is to be structured and devoted to coping with the menace of internal subversion, the US in some more or less formal sense would have to assume the obligation of protecting South Vietnam from conventional external invasion. This is an obligation we have more or less tacitly assumed all along and hence would involve little real further commitment for US interests. Our willingness to undertake it, however, would have to be spelled out fairly unequivocally -- even if privately -- to Vietnamese military leaders. Furthermore, we would have to make some disposition and deployment of US forces to prove that we were prepared to step in to defend South Vietnam on very short notice if necessary. In conjunction with such a deployment, there might be advantages to ~~US~~ ^{US} ~~supplying~~ ^{supplying} US logistical resources on Vietnamese soil. and, perhaps, accompanying them with small

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guard detachments of US forces. Any positioning of US combat forces on Vietnamese territory, however, should endeavor to avoid presenting the VC with too tempting a military target on which they could inflict a psychologically adverse defeat.

(b) Present anomalies in US posture of "advisors" would have to be -- and, indeed, should be -- eliminated. For example, the rule that US-piloted aircraft cannot fire on targets of opportunity unless so requested by some Vietnamese authority should be scrapped. Operational instructions and directives in this sphere should be swiftly reviewed in toto to eliminate technical obstructions or niceties which fool no one and prevent US forces from rendering maximum effective support to the GVN counterinsurgency effort.

(c) If the type of decentralization and provincial concentration suggested above is to be implemented, time-worn and heretofore sacrosanct US administrative, budgetary and accounting procedures would have to be ^{revised} reviewed, and in some cases, scrapped.

(d) Even though the commitment of US ground forces (i.e., combat ftroops) in substantial numbers need not be -- and at the moment, should not be -- considered, our public posture vis-a-vis the GVN should probably be changed to that of an ally

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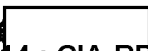


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some of the dangers inherent in external adventures whose contribution to stability within South Vietnam is, at best, problematical. In sum, we recommend that before opting exclusively for escalation or negotiation, a final -- but nonetheless fresh -- look be given to counterinsurgency.

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